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Nixon's Silence Is a Serious Mistake

LAW OF Holy Writ lays it down that for everything there is a time and a season. A law of public life is that a man can be all too right too long and in defending a sound position can defend it all too well.

Both of these axiomatic homilies may fairly be said to apply today to Richard Nixon. The President's long retirement from public view and his long abstention from public utterance should now come to an end. In the abstract, both the low profile and the silence are quite understandable and quite justifiable. The immensely delicate nature of the Vietnam negotiations, in which the smallest verbal indiscretion could have incalculable consequences, naturally and rightly preoccupies the President.

His behavior here is, moreover, both strictly constitutional and highly responsible. There is ample historical precedent for his reticence and his restraint. He has no obligation to send his most intimate advisers up to Capitol Hill to tell all. He has no obligation to justify to the Senate the military decisions he has taken as commander-in-chief, including the decision for massive bombing of North Vietnam.

TO SAY ALL THIS, however, is not to say that the President's insistence upon his unique prerogatives — and upon his duty to bear a unique burden —is wise in its form and manners, as distingished from its substance. In the substance of the business he is entirely right; in a tactical and practical way he is making serious mistakes.

It is unwise, for illustration, in all the present circumstances, that he is not going to Congress personally to deliver his State of the Union message, eyeball to eyeball. The explanation that this would be a repetitive act, since after all he will certainly express himself directly in his inaugural address at the Capitol, is both true and inadequate to those present circumstances.

For the President confronts not a theory but rather a condition, as Grover Cleveland once observed in another connection. He need not, he should not, and—one almost might say —he must not concede to the Senate even a chemical trace of his constitutional authority alone to conduct the Vietnam negotiations and alone to direct the deployment and use of American military forces. He does need, however, to pay such deference to the Senate and to his critics in general as might serve to ease their pains without any touch of surrender of constitutional principle and without risking harm to the great enterprise of finding an honorable exit from Vietnam.

Conciliatory gestures, to be sure, would come very hard. Mr. Nixon has been abused by the far-out doves as few Presidents have been abused in any kind of controversy. Some of them even threaten to hold his Cabinet appointments hostage, by refusing to grant the ordinarily routine Senate confirmation, because they don't like what he is doing in Vietnam. He can justly feel that this is petulant blackmail and heedless of the most elementary sense of senatorial responsibility.

YES, HE CAN feel this way; but it won't do him any good. For the more vehement anti-Nixonites in politics and in the field of commentary are creating a state of affairs in which reason and civility are being denied not only to Richard Nixon but also to the political processes of this nation. If he remains silent much longer, some malignant myths—that there is a "dictator" in the White House, that "democratic government" itself is under assault—will become ineradicably embedded into at least part of the national consciousness.

In brief, the President is allowing a violent and in some cases an actually hysterical opposition the whole initiative in a contest for the public's mind and emotions. He needs to put an end to that monopoly, to seize a counter-initiative of his own.

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